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ABSTRACT

Moral desperation has traditionally been defined as an individual's lack of social adjustment patterns in regard to his/her particular stage of cognitive development. Based on the assumption that the overall behavior patterns of adolescents differ in different social class settings, moral desperation was hypothesized to be a complex, multidimensional entity rather than a monotheoretical concept. College students (N=40) were given a series of tests to assess the behavioral complexity of moral desperation. Results indicated that the emotional component of each individual perception was very strong and multidimensional, suggesting that adolescent moral desperation should be viewed from a perspective broader than the cognitive dimension. (Author)

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MORAL DESPERATION IN ADOLESCENCE

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Introduction

In western industralized societies, the problem of social orientation for youth is a major developmental task. For those individuals who can master this task, moral development is relatively sound and inproblematic. However, those individuals who fail in mastery, face moral desperation.

Moral desperation has traditionally been defined as an individual's lack of social adjustment patterns in regard to his or her particular stage of cognitive development (Piaget, 1970; Kohlberg, 1969; Eckensberger & Reinshager, 1977). However, another definition is possible for all youth in general and adolescents in particular. This definition states that moral desperation must be viewed in regard to an individual's social class status (Schurian & ter Horst, 1977). With regard to the social class, two normative systems predominate. They are: (1) the "productive normative system" (PNS) and (2) the "structural normative system" (SNS). The PNS and SNS provide guidelines for moral development within the context of social class.

Previous research has indicated that adolescents from the working class exhibit a tendency of being oriented mainly toward the PNS. Behavioral correlates of the PNS include aspects of solidarity, cooperation, and association. On the other hand, adolescents from the so called middle class reveal a tendency toward the SNS. Corresponding behaviors include the desire for status, prestige and competiveness (Schurian, 1979).

Within the context of the cited information, one must begin to reexamine traditional theories of moral development and, in particular, those dealing with moral desperation. Based upon the assumption that the overall behavioral patterns of adolescents differ in different social class settings (Schurian, 1979), it was hypothesized that moral desperation is a complex multidimensional entity rather than a monotheoritical concept as proposed by many traditional theorists. An initial pilot study was thus constructed to test some of the aspects of complexity within moral desperation.

Method

Volunteers were solicited, and 49 students (ages 19-27) were selected as participants. All the students were from the University of Munster, West Germany. Here they received initial instruction. The individuals were told they were participating in a study and would be given a series of tests. No further information was given. Background demographic data was collected on all subjects.

The subjects then received a series of tests designed to assess the behavioral complexity of moral desperation. The tests were divided into four parts. Part one consisted of the Pauli - Test. This is a mathematical paper and pencil test designed to assess concentration under stress. Part two consisted of employing multi-colored answer sheets to assess the individual's color - form perception. Part three was a low level noise test designed to assess the subject's emotional perception. Part four was a questionnaire about the subject's impressions of the previous three parts, plus information about other impressions including moral evaluations.

The tests were given over a period of three weeks. Hand-scoring of all results followed.

Results

The results of the testing indicated that an individual's perceptions are basically independent, and mutually exclusive. The emotional component of each individual perception was found to be very strong and multidimensional. That is, every aspect of perception was judged by each individual on an evaluative/moral level automatically.

Discussion

In light of some of the recent conceptual achievements within modern science (e.g., systems theory and evolutionary science), one can begin to view moral desperation from a multilevel mode of perception. This circumvents traditional theories which view moral desperation in a cognitive dimension only. In modern evolutionary science, one can distinguish between at least seven levels of behavior (Jantsch, 1979; Schurian, 1979). They are: dissipative cellular I & II, organismic, reflexive, self-reflexive, and evolutionary symbolic (Table 1). In viewing moral desperation from the cited levels of behavior, one can begin to view the complexity of its nature.

Table 1 About Here

Furthermore, moral desperation viewed under such said premises differs from the traditional concepts in another aspect. Although, for instance, Kohlberg and Piaget view the development of morality as a sequence of steps and stages in which every subsequent stage incorporates the previous ones, it may be viewed from a slightly different perspective. That is, moral desperation is functioning continuously on all levels of behavior, more or less expressively, all the time. The previous stages are never wholly incorporated in subsequent stages, but continue to function even if the individual has already reached the next, "higher", phase in development (Figure 1).

Figure 1 About Here

In summary, there appears to be evidence indicating that moral desperation, particularly in adolescence, should be viewed from a much broader perspective than just the cognitive model. The pilot study hinted that there are several distinguishable levels on which the individual functions, and employs for making moral decisions about himself and his environment.

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TABLE 1

Levels of Behavior and Perception and

How They Relate to Moral

Desperation

Levels of Behavior and Perception	Moral Desperation	Aspects of Behavior
7 evolutive - symbolic	ethic-esthetic	- universal norms, ethics of the whole system, symbols, beauty (clothing, mannerisms, etc.)
6 self - reflective	conscientious (Kohlberg 5)	- moral relativism, problems of identities
5 reflexive	concrete (Kohlberg 1-4)	- reactive behavior, disorientation, moral realism, "egocentrism", narcistic reactions.
4 organismic	intuitive (Kohlberg 0)	- gut-level-reactions, psychosomatic disorders i.e. anorexia nervosa.
3 cellular II	metabolic	- "chemical" reactions
2 cellular I	- -	
1 dissipative	energetic	- vibrations, immediate connections to the outside, reactions of strain and stress on a physical and immediate connection.

FIGURE 1

Pictoral Differences Between Single

Stage and Multilevel Moral Desperation Theories